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ABSTRACT

This paper presents in descriptive and practical terms a rationale for working towards openness in the classroom. Open education is defined as a humanistic approach designed to offer support to the children in their move towards self-realization. More than classroom structure, open education is a way of thinking about children, learning, self and knowledge. Key concepts of openness are (1) play, the vehicle through which children order and learn about the world they live in; (2) an affective view of education, the awareness of the child's self and inclusion of feelings and responsiveness in the educational milieu; (3) social interaction, giving children ample opportunity to experiment with way of relating to their peers, (4) an emphasis on the learning process, (how one comes to know) rather than on the right answer; (5) the teacher as facilitator of learning helping the child to go where he/she wants to go; and (6) the classroom as an environment reflecting the teacher as a person. (Author/MS)

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WHAT IS YOUR STYLE?

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Open education is a humanistic approach designed to offer support to the children in their move towards self-realization. As teachers what we must do is to accept the children and help them learn what kind of people they are. As we work with them, we try to discover their learning styles, aptitudes, interests, and weak points in order to help them build on their good raw materials - their potentialities.

Since the overriding philosophy of open education is that children's idiosyncratic social, emotional and intellectual development is paramount, it would help to consider psychological principles of how children learn.

1. Each child learns differently and has his/her own schedule and strategy for learning.
2. Children learn optimally in a rich and complex environment which encourages exploration.
3. Children learn best in a self directed fashion and in an environment which fosters their interaction with learning materials and with other people.

This presents a basic rationale for working towards openness, but what does it mean in descriptive or practical terms?

In describing a classroom or a school that is a prototype

of an open, informal classroom, teachers who are in Headstart, Day Care or Centers with children from 2 to 6 will exclaim, "Well, what is different about that! We have centers in our rooms. Our children play in the block corner, the housekeeping corner, the art center, the sand table. We have been practicing open education!"

Perhaps many have been, without the label, but open education is more than classroom structure, though that is an important component. It is a way of thinking about children, about learning, about self, about knowledge. It is the integration of everything to do with the children's development - physical, mental, and emotional. Whatever the structure, the essential philosophy is that children are unique, physically active individuals with learning needs and styles which can best be met in an environment that is flexible characterized by mutual respect for children and teachers. It implies an environment in which the possibilities for exploration and learning about the self and the world in ever widening concentric circles, are not only unobstructed, but facilitated by teachers who are open to their feelings and growth as they engender this openness and curiosity in children. It posits an integration of interests under the direction of a teacher who recognizes and extends the teachable moment.

There are key words and ideas that exemplify openness in classrooms. One key word is play. Percy Sutton-Smith, Susan Isaacs, Montessori, and Piaget have written extensively about play and its role in young children's lives. These early childhood specialists realized that for the young child, play is a step towards the development of internalized meanings and actions. Play, then, is children's work, for it is through play that children order and learn about the world they live in. They must be allowed to do things over and over - the imitative aspect of learning, reassuring themselves that what they have learned is true: that patterns do repeat themselves, that things, if not people, are constant.[1] The child finds this repetitive activity pleasurable. If you have watched a two or three year old try to fit a toy together, you have noted the joy, the yell of delight when s/he succeeds, the returning to try it again and again. Many parents and teachers regard this as "Isn't that cute!" but not as a learning experience. They see it as play and contrast it with something called work. They encourage the child to occupy herself with toys designed with specific learning goals trusting that the material is sufficient. Perhaps they are, but the opportunities for learning are increased when the teacher understands the percepts and concepts inherent in the material.

It is through repetitious imitation, the trying on of roles in dramatic play, the creative use of materials that children begin to understand the intellectual, social and psychological tenets of the world. The teacher's role is not passive while the child is at play. It is to observe, analyze levels of development, and relate the play to: "What are the children learning?" and "What am I learning about the children?". When it is a teachable moment, the teacher interacts with the child to initiate or extend learnings. If the child seems to be "stuck", help or support is offered for continued investigation. They work together to develop related ideas, to integrate tangential concepts. Throughout the interaction in play, the children are learning to trust their curiosity and to see the teacher as a resource.

It is essential to be attentive to the fact that as children play they are learning about themselves and the people in their world. This is the second key or recurrent theme in openness - the affective view of education which is the awareness of the self of the child and the inclusion of feelings and responsiveness in the educational milieu. A positive sense of self and of others synergizes learning. The adults set the tone that will nurture or stifle this awareness of self. The adults who people his/her world provide an answer to the child's wondering about the world:

is it a safe, responsive place or is it fraught with prohibitions and unmet needs? Are the people caring and supportive or methodical and thwarting? Open classrooms are humanistic as contrasted with many traditional classrooms where the product rather than the process is stressed, the intellectual content rather than the individual.

Psychological studies have posited a relationship between the sense of self and learning. Young children, highly egocentric, begin with this "self" as the core. The significant others in their lives provide a gestalt of reactions from which children glean a sense of "Who am I? I exist, I can do". This is related to evolving attitudes towards authority and relationships within the peer group. In the open classroom children are free to experience, to discover, to try out the reactions of others to their behavior. The caring and sense of respect and trust for children help to build a secure sense of self at the stage when they are most malleable.

A strong focus at this early childhood level is the shoring up of the structure of the self. Many children who are plagued with learning problems have not established a congruence between the egocentric self and the achieving self. Teachers must provide for success oriented experiences for children and remove the stigma of failure from trial and error learning. In learning situations, whether it is

learning to tie a shoe, button a coat, identify colors or to count the blocks, it is a rarity to encounter instant success. Children need the freedom to make mistakes without a fear of failure. It is the function of the insightful teacher to know when to step in with help, when to provide the verbal encouragement, the supportive response. Tasks should be within the achievement level of the child, for if too great a dissonance is felt, the child will develop a negative self image or move away from the situation to avoid anxiety.

In open classrooms as children become more comfortable with their feelings, they will be able to approach new situations and pursue their curiosity. They will feel less constrained, more able to reach out to others - the teachers and the peer groups. This brings us to the third key to openness - the provision for and the encouragement of social interaction. This is done through ample opportunities for children to experiment with ways of relating to their peers, aided by teachers who encourage them to learn from each other, to talk and interact freely and to develop the skills of verbalization as they learn to assess social situations and find workable solutions.

Socialization is an integral component of the schooling of young children and provides reality situations for

multifaceted growth. John Dewey's philosophy was a harbinger of the learning is living, living is learning precept that is practiced. Young children function best in the here and now for they are not sufficiently mature to be motivated by delayed gratification. Using the modality of "We learn what we live," children are helped to work out social interactions to see the causal relationships of their behavior rather than to perpetuate a reliance on adult solutions. Teachers who work with young children constantly deal with child-child confrontations. Children need to understand and cope with the consequences of individual behavior. As the children work out cause and effect behavioral situations, they are developing critical and creative thinking processes, so vital in intellectual growth. Again we see an integration of social-intellectual relationship, that is part of the grid of openness.

Teachers can describe many situations where they have responded prescriptively rather than non-directively. Children need to be helped in working through logical approaches, as witnessed in these situations:

"If you hit Susan what do you think she will do?" rather than

"We do not hit each other!"

"If you all want turns on the swing, what should you do?"

rather than

"Let's all take turns."

These responses imply a teacher-child relationship characterized by growth and respect, but the teacher has to bear in mind that the application of the structure of logic varies with the developmental level. The teacher and child will confront issues of sharing and aggression but the solution is predicated on the child's ability to conceptualize the situation. The young child, mired in an egocentric point of view, has to confront the points of view of others. A child to child clash of convictions, with time to work it through, though difficult for the teacher to observe, can offer more help to the children in growth towards socialization than adult solutions to the conflict. As they grow they learn to accept responsibility for the rules of the games and rules of classroom living. Children come to realize that these rules have a direct effect on their functioning successfully and happily.

The threads of play, growth of the self and socialization are intertwined in the development of learning, the fourth key word in open classrooms. The emphasis in open classrooms is not on the right answer, the right knowledge, but rather on how one comes to know what one can know. This evolves through curiosity, self selection, placing

and active exploration in a rich environment with a wide variety of carefully selected and/or teacher made materials. Given this rich environment buoyed by adult encouragement and trust children can be encouraged to take a large part in the design of their own learning. Children in restrictive settings are highly reliant on routine and show little initiative with materials. In classrooms characterized by flexibility, novelties and serendipities heighten awareness and learning as children move towards independence, creativity and choice making. Encouraging choice making and decision making contributes to their learning and provides a framework for the teacher to learn about the children and to plan when, how and whether to intervene. As Hawkins points out in her work with deaf children in an inner city school: "How a child selects and uses materials from the initial provisioning depends upon him and his unique store of experiences. His behavior expresses his present and developing resources and concomitantly increases my understanding of how and what to plan with and for him."[2]

In conventional school settings teachers divide the day between "unstructured" play activities and teacher directed "learning experiences". There is a behavioral and mental schism between the two. In classrooms we have been describing, learning and time are viewed more openly and the child is respected as the active agent in self-directed learning.

Interest areas have always been included in classrooms for young children but in open classrooms, these are the warp and the woof of the development of cognition. The areas must include a variety of materials to provide options and springboards for learning, to offer opportunities to organize and integrate experience through the use of these materials. For example, wooden planks should be available with the blocks or climbing bars to extend concepts of space and balance. Sand tables should have measuring containers and water for the integration of science and math. For the block corner, the teacher introduces a large cardboard box that could be thought of as a garage, but the children see it differently. In and out they move, trying out different people arrangements, internalizing bits and pieces of relational ideas--inside-outside, closed-open, empty-full. In the water area, measuring containers, floating and sinking materials, bubble pipes and suds will enable children to investigate the properties of materials.

The kinds of actions children perform in pursuing their interests in the classroom form the basis for present and future learning and must be supported by standards and expectations. Children, in pursuing choices, move within the rules of the classroom: "Three people in the block area." "Put your name on the peg in the area you

you choose". Children respect those routines that are established with them rather than handed down as edicts. They sense when the routines, freedom and limits facilitate or stifle their learning. Freedom must be viewed in terms of the activity, as part of the framework of flexibility and individuality in the classroom. Teachers need to assess the regulations and relax them in light of the materials and activities that are the "stuff" of children's learning. Perhaps a class rule is "No water in the sand table". But let's follow a child at the sand table and determine if the learning is being stifled. The child at the sand table brings a container of water and begins to pour it into channels. Many geographic learnings and ecological discoveries can be made -- erosion, water absorption, water flow, irrigation. The child is acting upon the environment, providing the framework for later levels of cognition. The small child moves to the paints and reenacts the same experience - forming concepts at the point of transfer. The child is knotting the world together through these acting out experiences. In this context we would agree that water at the sand table was a vital part of the child's learning.

Learning in opening classrooms is viewed as a consequence of the interaction between the child and the world, whether it is exemplified by an idea, a gerbil, a

block or a paint brush. In the self selection of the activities, the child is more accutely aware of what he is attempting to learn than when the teacher is the source of all learning. Adults can identify with this when they drive a car but the directions and destination are in the hands of the passenger who is directing the driver. The driver feels manipulated, not in control of the situation. In addition, he is not aware of signposts, learning opportunities about streets and directions as he would be if he were finding his own route.

Which brings us in our mapping of open education, to the fifth key - the teacher as a facilitator of learning, aware of knowledge inherent in materials, observant of the levels and needs of the child, and a master of meshing the two. Materials are a source of analogies vital to cognition, but they can only occur when the child makes the connection. The teacher's role is to carefully select the materials, to ask the right question, to push childrens thinking. The teacher's role is that of educational travel agent, helping the child to go where he/she wants to go. As travel agents, the teacher offers advice at the teachable moment on the best way to get there; reads stories that will help the children understand ~~his~~ their experiences, provides materials to work

out related learning, and underscores the importance of recording the experience through the camera, creative writing dictated to the teacher, block constructions, and art media. In other words, there is no impression without expression - the act of conceptualizing and analyzing an active experience.

Teachers function on three levels with children:

1. observe
2. interfere
3. join

The three are often fused since observation permeates all functions, but the following questions guide the teacher:

1. What does the child need?
2. What does the child seem to be interested in?
3. What is the child ready for?
4. What are the child's purposes?
5. How does the child follow them?
6. What are the child's questions?

The teacher's role is flexible in response to the observed, verbalized, or demonstrated needs of the child. There are times when the teacher is directive, when instruction or information is necessary to extend the child's learning. It is difficult to draw this fine line of teacher response, but Roland Barth in Open Classrooms cautions that a rule of

thumb might be that direct instruction is indicated "when there is likelihood that the child's failure will curtail exploration and those in which there is danger to self, others or equipment."[3] We might add: or when a pivotal question or piece of information will enable the child to leap ahead. Teachers are imbued with the need to teach and as noble as this mission is, the teacher and the taught relationship is fraught with problems of "eagerness and egoness".[4]

The use of questioning is a pivotal art. Instead of asking, after an exploring the environment experience, "What did you see?" ask, "What happened?" In the use of magnets, rather than "Why won't it pick up wood?" ask, "What is the magnet doing?" These focus on the active involvement of the child. The ability to pose the trigger question, the use of the teachable moment to extend learning, grow out of the teacher's observation of the children to determine the structure of their learning. The vital point is to know the children as people - their physical and emotional states, the way they move, their gestures, their expressions, the vital communicative content of their non-verbal behavior.

As a concomitant of this, and an aspect of openness that is a serious cause of concern in many classrooms, is the need to keep records, for if we individualize our approach

with children, we have to be guided by careful records. At least once a week teachers should:

1. Note anything that seems important in the development of the child, for it could denote a stage of learning that the teacher could extend.
2. Jot down salient bits of conversation. Many clues to their needs surface in peer dialogues or egocentric speech.
3. Observe and record the rhythm and pattern of learning for each child. Some children spend a long time "mucking about" and do not settle on an activity until they have explored, while others move right in to an activity. In interacting with children, in observing their activities, it is important to remember that it is the depth of an experience that children have that is vital to their learning, not the amount of time invested in it. A few minutes of real experience that causes something to happen in the child is the ultimate goal of the teacher.

The final key to openness is the environment of the classroom which reflects the teacher as a person. The

teacher as a total person exists in open classrooms. A conducive learning environment includes a sense of order that is essential to the growth of order within the child, and an aesthetic milieu which indicates to the children that they are respected and cared for. Giving and providing permanence, order and beauty for children supports an interest in learning and sets the tone for affective and creative growth.

Teachers who are in a caring relationship with children must be aware of their own growth and reactions. They should constantly understand their relationships with others, children and adults, asking, "What was it in the situation that triggered my reaction?"

Growing as a professional person means taking responsibility for being the right kind of person towards immature beings. The teacher, as the most mature person in the room, is the role model. Being a grown-up implies being more predictable; as role models teachers help children to learn that it is right to become a predictable person in conjunction with the need to be flexible and nurturant in responsiveness to others. Crucial to this responsiveness facilitating function of the teacher is the enjoyment of children. Open classrooms provide opportunities for the teacher to be spontaneous with children - to be a whole person - to share a sense of enjoyment in learning together, interacting, sharing

teacher and the taught positions, to free other human beings to be themselves, to choose to learn through active involvement, to decide how to see, how to think, how to be.

The goal thus far has been to encourage and enable those charged with the education of young children to look at another way of working with children, to provide a new focus for the relationship among learning-living-teaching. The classroom should be viewed as a setting for the integration of creative, personal, intellectual and physical growth. In this climate the children are the agents of their own learning, guided by skilled, empathic teachers clued into the needs, interests, and levels of the children as well as into their own.

There is no one effective way of functioning with children but the pervasive question should be, "What kinds of children for what kind of society? And along with this to see the school as a place designed to help children understand and cope with the world, to find their places in it guided by teachers who are open to questions . . . to change.

Footnotes

1. John Blackie, Inside The Primary School. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967, Introduction.
2. Frances Hawkins, The Logic of Action , University of Colorado, Mountain View Center for Education, 1969,p.28.
3. Roland Barth, Open Education and The American School, New York, Agathon Press, 1972, p.88
4. David Hawkins, On Living in Trees, ESS Reader, Denver, University of Colorado Press, no.33.